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ABSTRACT

This publication was prepared as a resource guide to teaching strategies that help students understand the background, nature, and pervasive influence of the U.S. Constitution in the lives of every citizen. As the Constitutional Bicentennial approaches, the focus in many social studies classes increasingly will be on teaching about this most important document. Results from two recent textbook evaluation studies showed that the treatment of the Constitution in U.S. history, government, and civics textbooks is inadequate and incomplete. Because they lack in-depth coverage of the Constitution, textbooks should be used as part of a larger group of resources that include many types of supplementary materials. Supplementary curricula developed by projects commemorating the Constitution are described. In addition, brief descriptions are provided of on-going projects dealing with the Constitution that are funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. An annotated listing of ERIC documents dealing with the Constitution is also included. The documents fall into the categories of law-related education, citizenship education, and student participation or community involvement. (RM)

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TEACHING ABOUT THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

ERIC Digest No. 12

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TEACHING ABOUT THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Because social studies educators have the primary responsibility for teaching about the United States Constitution, they have always been concerned with how this document might be approached most effectively. Now, as the Constitutional Bicentennial approaches, the focus in many social studies courses will increasingly be on teaching about this important subject. This ERIC Digest was prepared as a resource guide to teaching strategies which help students understand the background, nature, and pervasive influence of the U.S. Constitution in the lives of every citizen.

Are textbooks sufficient resources for teaching about the Constitution?

Results from two recent textbook evaluation studies commissioned by Project '87, a project sponsored by the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association (1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036), and the Indiana University Social Studies Development Center provide an answer to this question. The studies compared the coverage of constitutional issues in widely-used textbooks.

John J. Patrick (Social Studies Development Center, Indiana University) found that the treatment of the Constitution in American history textbooks for grades 8 and 11 is inadequate and incomplete. The texts (1) do not give enough emphasis to the positive features of the Articles of Confederation, (2) present brief, shallow, and bland descriptions of the ratification process, (3) provide little information about the Amendments, (4) treat judicial review superficially, and (5) rarely demonstrate how changes in the Constitution are connected to political events. The textbooks also fail to include several important topics--the ambiguous division of powers between national and state government that resulted from the Constitutional Convention, several landmark Supreme Court decisions and dissenting opinions, and connections between Supreme Court decisions from different eras.

Richard C. Remy (Mershon Center, Ohio State University) found a number of weaknesses in the way that government and civic textbooks handle the Constitution. His study revealed both boring narrative and little in-depth coverage of Supreme Court issues. Most significantly, Remy found that the textbooks do not cover the significance of the Constitution, fail to connect constitutional topics to each other and the rest of the narrative, rarely compare the role of the Constitution in the American political system and other political systems, and miss opportunities to relate discussions of historical institutions, issues, and events to the Constitution.

Both Patrick and Remy conclude that textbooks should not be the only instructional aids in teaching about the Constitution. They can help students acquire knowledge and concepts and achieve objectives. However, since textbook treatment of the Constitution can be poor and incomplete, they should be used as part of a larger group of resources that includes many types of supplementary materials.

Complete versions of the Patrick and Remy studies appear in *TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS*, edited by Howard D. Mehlinger (American Historical Association, 400 A St., S.E., Washington, DC 20003 and the American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036, 1981).

What supplementary materials have been developed by projects commemorating the Constitution?

Project '87 and the National Endowment for the Humanities (Office of the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20506) are currently the two most active supporters of Bicentennial events. Both are involved in projects related to the teaching of the Constitution.

Two Project '87 programs focus on education: Stage II, teaching the Constitution in schools and colleges, and Stage III, the development of public programs that will heighten public awareness of the Constitution and provoke informed discussion of Constitutional themes. Several activities sponsored as part of these stages are of interest to classroom educators.

In 1980 Project '87 and the Indiana University Social Studies Development Center co-sponsored a conference on "Teaching the Constitution in American Schools." Papers and recommendations from conference participants were published in *TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS*. A quarterly periodical, *THIS CONSTITUTION*, began publication in September 1983. The first section of the magazine consists of essays by specialists that suggest themes and topics for Bicentennial programs. Documents related to the Constitution, an explanation of their content, and an analysis of their importance are featured in the second section. The last section describes upcoming Bicentennial events and funding sources for Bicentennial programs and activities.

Finally, a curriculum resource book for teaching about the Constitution has been developed. *LESSONS ON THE CONSTITUTION: SUPPLEMENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL COURSES IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND AMERICAN HISTORY* (SO 015 026) by John J. Patrick and Richard C. Remy contains lessons designed to remedy textbook deficiencies and enrich current textbook treatments regarding Constitutional history and principles of government.

